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ABSTRACT

Quality of life in adulthood (ages 27-47) was investigated: age, marital status and sex were considered the primary variables. Attention was given to the consideration of the current crises-oriented theory of adult development. The interrelationship of the variables was of principle interest in assessing life satisfaction and personality development. An interview questionnaire form assessed 15 components considered important in determining the quality of life, and included sections on assessment of feeling and rank order lists of current concerns and sources of help. Subjects included 150 men and women, married and single: age groups were clustered around the 30, 35, 40 and 45 year milestones. Results suggest few differences on the relative importance of the 15 components: however, on most of the components, this population considered their needs inadequately met. Although age and sex did not influence life satisfaction: marital status did. Ranking of concerns and sources of help indicated age trends, affected by both sex and marital status. The results suggest that adult development should not be viewed solely as a series of age-related crises: rather, age interacts with the socially-related variables. Indicated trends over age suggest continued personality development through the adult period that appears somewhat consistent across subjects.
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Adult Development and Life Satisfaction as Functions of Sex, Marital Status and Age

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Paper presented at
Southeastern Psychological Association

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Adult Development and Life Satisfaction as Functions of Sex, Marital Status and Age

Recently, there has been a great deal of interest in adult development. The popular press, in particular, suggests that adulthood is marked by passages, transitions, and the "mid-life" crisis. Often negative, these situations are supposed to afflict us all at specific ages, usually at decade or mid-decade points, ages 30, 35, 40, etc. Levinson, in his recent book, The Seasons of a Man's Life (1978), focused on men's "early adulthood" (ages 17-45) which is reported to be as crisis ridden as adolescence and marked by many age-related changes. Earlier, Erikson (1963) continued his stage theory of psycho-sexual development into adulthood, hypothesizing that there were problems with development to solve all through adulthood. The problem of early adulthood is that of intimacy versus isolation. The second adult stage, beginning around 40, involves generativity versus stagnation; and finally, during late adulthood and old age comes the conflict of integrity versus despair. In contrast, others such as Neugarten and Datan (1974) suggest that chronological age is not a meaningful index by which to order the social and psychological data of adulthood. Differences and changes emerge from a combination of biological and social factors rather than from age.

While Levinson, focusing on men, found age to be a relevant variable, we felt that there are other variables that affect the quality of life and the nature of changes in life, or that might interact with age. Specifically, we believed that sex and marital status were important variables. The importance of sex as a variable was also emphasized by Kimmel (1979) who questioned the validity of applying the research and the theories of adult development which were based on men directly to adult women. Marital status was investigated because it is a powerful variable with high social and economic significance in people's lives.

Blau (1977) indicated the need for evaluation procedures and studies aimed at assessing the quality of life, based on the assumption that subjective perception of life quality seems to indicate that large numbers of citizens are currently dissatisfied and perhaps less satisfied than were those of previous generations. Flanagan (1978) reported the results of such a study of life satisfaction; this survey included a large sample of Americans from all walks of life, at ages 30, 50, and 70. Using an interview procedure, he assessed 15 components that he considered important in determining quality of life. A pilot study conducted by this author suggested that married women ages 28 through 47 showed no age related differences in overall life satisfaction. However, personal problems and concerns including feelings about certain age related

stereotypes did change (e.g., worrying about death, feeling that there was still time to make choices).

The questions, therefore, are: (1) Are there differences in life satisfaction between men and women, and are these differences affected by age or marital status? (2) Are there developmental crises during the adult years (27-47), can these crises be seen as a continuum from intimacy and generativity through ego integrity, and are they a function of age milestones or independent of age? (3) If there are age-related developmental stages during this period, is the pattern the same for both men and women and for both married and single people?

In addition to investigating these important questions, our second purpose was and is to develop a questionnaire that would assess factors including components of life satisfaction and questions related to feelings. To ascertain whether, in fact, certain problems or concerns arise particularly at certain ages, a section was included that required ranking of current problems. A third section, based on the hypothesis that age, sex and/or marital status influence a person's support system, was a rank order list of sources of help ranging from immediate family to professionals. The questionnaire had the following form (see Appendix A):

1. Demographic section. We asked a number of demographic questions to establish the social class, marital status, and

other characteristics to determine if we had a good sample and to suggest what the effects of some of these demographic variables might be.

2. A section based on Flanagan's 15 areas of importance. Subjects were asked to rate how important each area was to them on a 5 pt. - Lickert scale. Then they were asked to rate how well their needs were being met in each of these areas. The 15 areas were:

(a) Material and financial security

(b) Personal health (mental and physical)

(c) Intimacy with a spouse or lover

(d) Parenting and children

(e) Other family other than spouse and children

(f) Friends and friendship

(g) Altruism - helping others in various ways

(h) Politics and social actions

(i) Personal/intellectual development

(j) Self understanding and insight

(k) Occupational satisfaction

(l) Creativity and personal expression

(m) Socializing with other people

(n) Passive recreation (reading/watching TV, etc.)

(o) Active recreation

3. To determine which areas of life were of greatest concern at what ages, a list of 10 possible concerns were given

(e.g., marriage, health, children), and subjects were asked to rank order problem areas as well as sources of help for those problems.

4. Finally, a list of 39 questions designed to assess personal feelings about emotional and age-related issues was given. Some were stereotypes such as "Men prefer younger women" and others were of a more personal nature, "I am lonely sometimes." We included these questions to see if we could isolate factors that were related to concerns at different ages.

To assess reliability, we performed a 3-week test-retest reliability correlation on a sample of 20 people (whose scores are not included in this analysis). Results, using a very strict criteria, absolute identity, were correlations between .70 and .80 varying slightly by the part of the questionnaire.

Subjects

Although we have on hand about 300 questionnaires from people between 20 and 50, we used only 150 in this analysis who were between the ages of 27 and 47. We used both men (n=70) and women (n=80), married (n=71) and single (n=79). We broke these down into four age groups clustered around the 30, 35, 40, and 45 year milestones that people seem to find psychologically important.

Data was collected from the DeKalb County, Georgia community in a variety of ways. We attempted to meet with

groups and pass them out personally. All responses were anonymous and were returned either personally or by mail. Among those who contributed their help were members of a number of non-credit extension courses at a university, several exercise classes and tennis teams, single parents groups, singles social groups, and a variety of neighborhood associations.

Description of sample: Examination of the demographic data shows that the sample has these characteristics:

(a) Middle to upper middle class, based on income: mode (30%) $15-27 thousand, and education: 50% went to college or have a college degree; 25% have some postgraduate work.

(b) They have 2.357 children, but 35% have no children.

(c) 32% report having problems with their spouse or lover in the last year, 44% don't. The rest either have not had problems or did not have a spouse/lover. So we are dealing with a well educated, middle class population.

Results

When asked if they had experienced problems specifically with their intimate relationship, children, finances or parents, there were no sex differences; however, there were marital status and age differences. Single people, which includes both never married and divorced or widowed, were more than twice as likely to report problems with their intimate relationship, children and finances than were married people.

Age differences were found in that there was a decline in reporting relationship problems over age, a peak incidence of problems with children at 40, a decrease in reporting financial problems at 40, and a sharp decline with parent problems at 45.

Life Satisfaction. We have attempted to compare our results with those of Flanagan.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Note that Flanagan's results are listed to the right of the sheet. When there are two numbers it means that there was an age effect with the 30 year olds in his sample being the first number and the 50 the second. The first chart is how important people believe that these areas are to their lives. Only on Children, Family and Altruism are there real differences from his sample.

Thinking that children and family might be low because of disproportionate number of single people, we looked at the totals broken down by marital status, finding that only on the children question was there any real differences between single and married, with the single people being much lower than married in rating the importance of children in their lives.

If you turn to the chart on how well needs are met, you will find a real discrepancy from Flanagan's results--on virtually every variable in this upper-middle-class privileged

sample, fewer people report that their needs are well met than did Flanagan's broader sample. This replicates our earlier study for married women alone. In our first study, we believed that it might be an artifact of that population, since we might have been dealing with relatively dissatisfied housewives, but this second sample is a much more diverse group.

Again we looked for a married single difference to see if this variable was making the difference. Here there were some lower scores for single people, although the married were still well below Flanagan's. Financial security (m=53, s=36), intimacy (m=67, s=23), children (m=54, s=32), family (m=41, s=31). These are the same variables as those on which they stated that they had serious problems, suggesting that marital status is a more powerful variable than sex or age in predicting quality of life. Given that one-half of all marriages end in divorce, 50% of the adult population can be expected to be single at some time.

Sex was not a very important variable here. The only disparities between men and women were on family (m=41, w=55) and friends (m=47, w=84) for importance. For needs met the results are the same except for children, family, and friends, where women say their needs are better met than men do, and personal intellectual development where the men say that their needs are better met (54 to 39).

Given these discrepant results, at least two possible explanations seem plausible when comparing this data with Flanagan's. First, this sample is an upper-middle-class, well educated group who may either have higher expectations for life satisfaction than the more diverse groups interviewed by Flanagan or who are more dissatisfied with their current life situation in this particular metropolitan environment. Secondly, these results were obtained through anonymous questionnaire while Flanagan's were based on personal interviews; possibly the former could provide a more honest assessment since interviewer influence is eliminated. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that the two procedures yielded vastly different results.

Concerns (not problems). To cross-check on what concerned people at various ages, we asked them to rank order the first five of a list of 10 areas of concern that they had had in the last year and to do the same for 10 places and people they might go to for help if they needed it.

We purposely didn't ask them to list serious problems, since we had done that previously. Here we wanted to know what they were concerned with and thinking about over age even if they didn't see it as constituting a serious problem.

Insert Figures 2-7 about here

As you can see if you look at the six graphs, there are age effects but they are very much tempered by the sex and marital status factors so that, if all groups were combined, it would be hard to see any trends. For instance, children are of great concern to single women at 40 and married men at 45. On the other hand, job and career is always of concern to married men but declined in importance for them. Job and career concerns went up at 35 for single women but married women had little interest throughout. Married people become more concerned with their parents after 35, while single people never do.

At 30, everyone except married women are concerned about their jobs and their future. Married women are concerned about their own emotional state, as are divorced men.

At 35, marriage has joined job and future for married men, married women are concerned about children and jobs, and divorced women are concerned about their own emotions, their job and future, and their children.

At 40, everyone except married men lists children, both men list job, and married men and divorced women list own emotional state.

At 45, divorced women are no longer concerned with their children but divorced men are, both married groups are worried about their own parents as well as their children, and married women are concerned about their own emotional states.

These results suggest that there may be some age trends toward greater concerns for family and emotions and less concern for job/career and the future. Still these trends are very much influenced by the sex and marital status of the person in question.

Insert Figures 8 and 9 about here

Subjects ranking of most often sought sources of help and least often sought sources are given in Figures 8 and 9. Contrary to original expectations, men were as likely as women to seek help from their spouse/lover and friends. Parents were listed as sources primarily by the younger age groups; clergy were cited only by married people. Community agencies were cited as the least likely sources.

At the present time, factor analysis of the last section of the questionnaire is incomplete. However, preliminary analysis indicates that there are definite age trends marked by a "positive aging factor" at age 30, existential concerns at age 35, acceptance of aging and loss of personal control about age 40, and "generativity" at age 45. Married persons indicated an "intimacy factor" absent in the single subjects, while women's highest ranking factor indicated a positive approach to aging, and men's highest ranking factor was more personal and related to high self-esteem.

Summary

When compared with Flanagan, this preliminary research emphasizes methodological problems in the accurate assessment of adult life satisfaction, including differential interview versus anonymous questionnaire effects. Flanagan used ages 30, 50 and 70; however, questionnaire results indicated differences in 30, 35, 40 and 45 year olds. These differences may limit the applicability of conclusions based on the larger age span. Most importantly, the results substantiate the necessity for consideration of other variables besides age in ascertaining life satisfaction and developing a model for adult development. Sex and marital status appear to be two of these variables.

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Figure 1

Percentages reporting each of the 15 components compared to Flanagan*

	Important or Very Important to their Quality of Life					Needs Well Met or Very Well Met				
	Age				Flanagan	Age				Flanagan
	30	35	40	45		30	35	40	45	
Security	72	79.5	73.5	84	80	43	41	44	45	70
Health	100	88	91	86.5	97	65	53	47	48	83
Intimate Relationship	95	87	94	83.8	89	55	53	41	38	83-75
Children	47.5	59	82	68	84-93	30	44	41	54	83
Family	35	36	44	60	75	35	39	35	48	75
Friends	65	74	70	57	76	55	59	58	41	80
Altruism	17.5	41	38.2	32.4	65-73	27.5	43.6	38	40.5	61-72
Political	2.5	13.5	11.8	10	45-60	22.5	41	26.5	32	54-63
Personal Development	70	77	58	65	84-67	40	64	32	46	54-64
Self-Knowledge	85	95	85	73	87	65	59	32	49	75
Occupation	95	82	85	81	88	45	41	44	45	75
Creativity	70	67	47	35	45	25	38.5	23.5	27	60
Social	37.5	36	35	43	48	27.5	53.8	29	32	72
Passive Recreation	50	49	44	59	54	42	64	32	54	71
Active Recreation	60	44	59	49	55	45	51	47	43	61

*Flanagan, J. C. A research approach to improving our quality of life. American Psychologist, 1978, 138-147.

Problem Areas of Most Concern

Figure 2

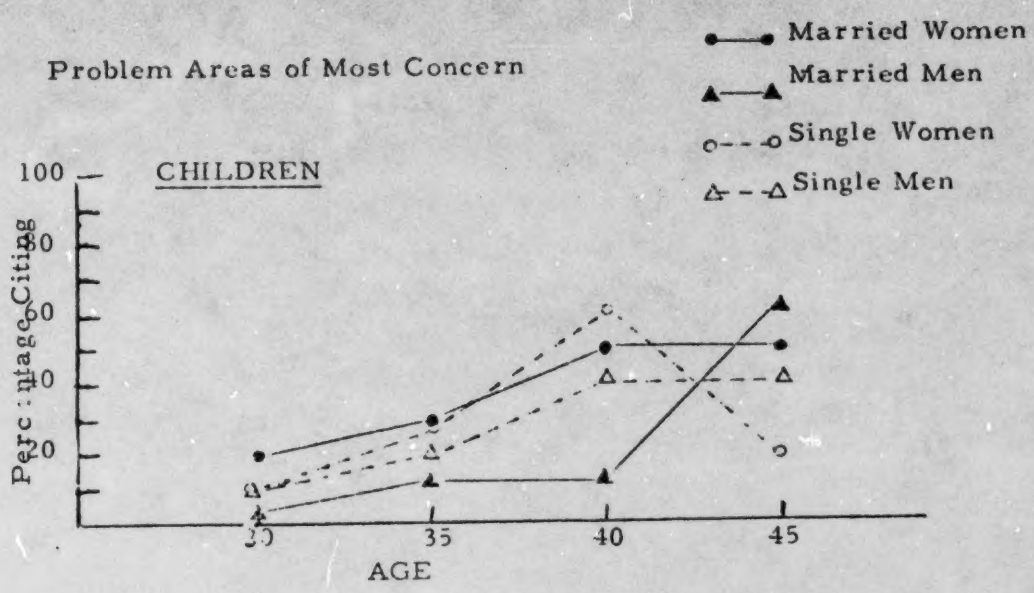


Figure 3

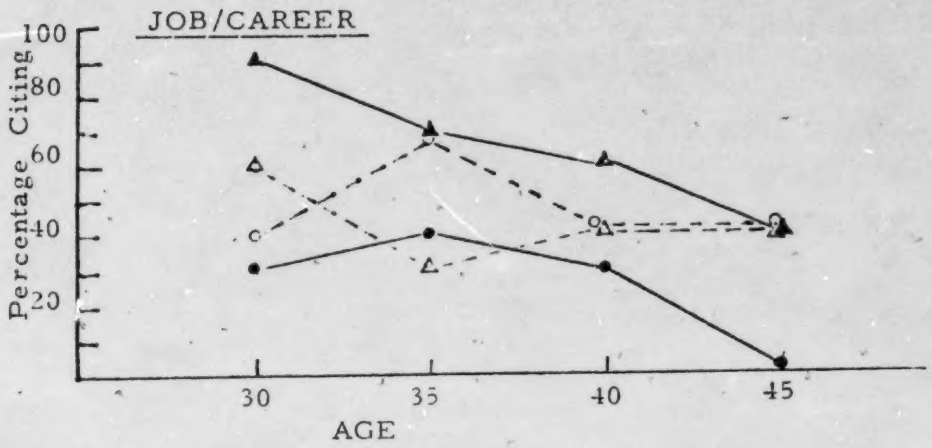
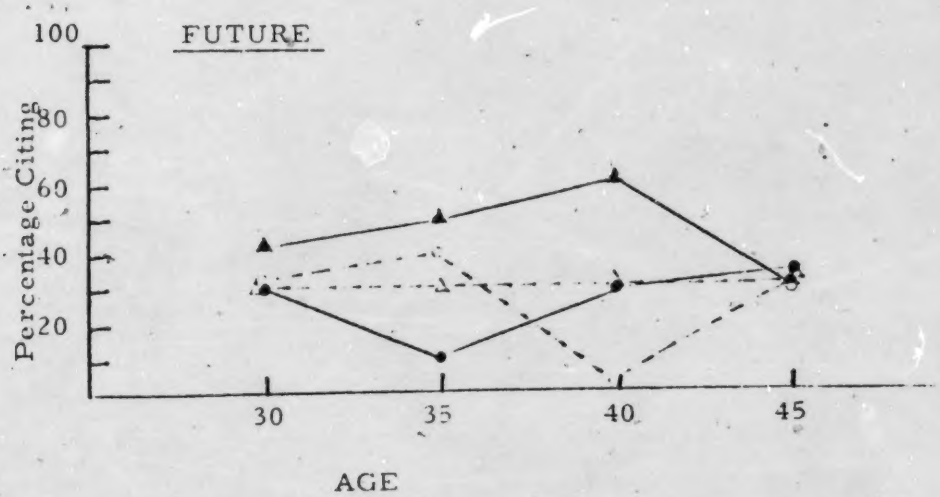


Figure 4



Problem Areas of Most Concern

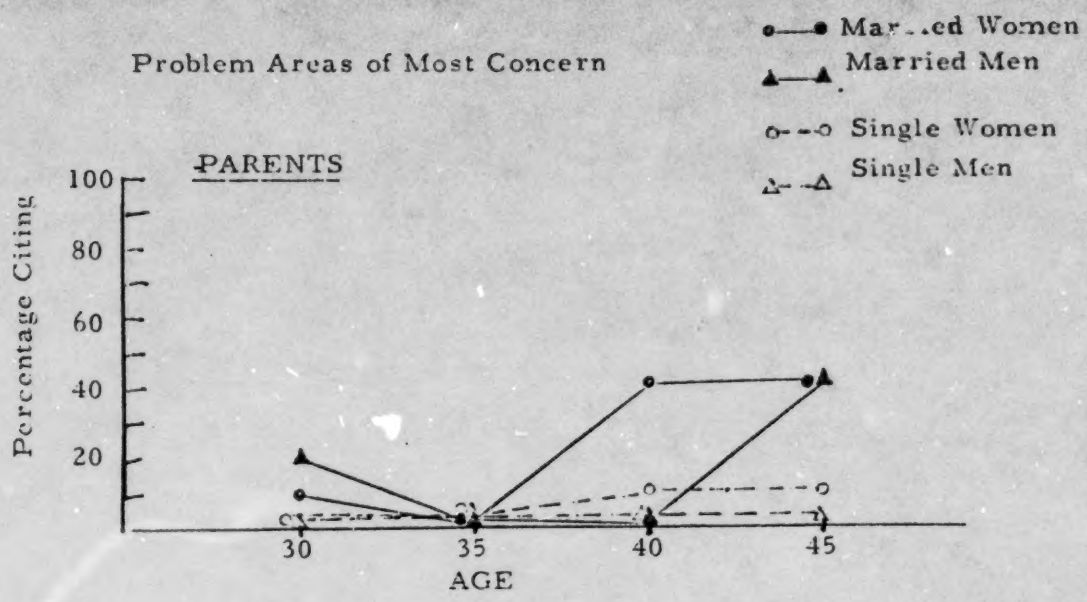


Figure 5

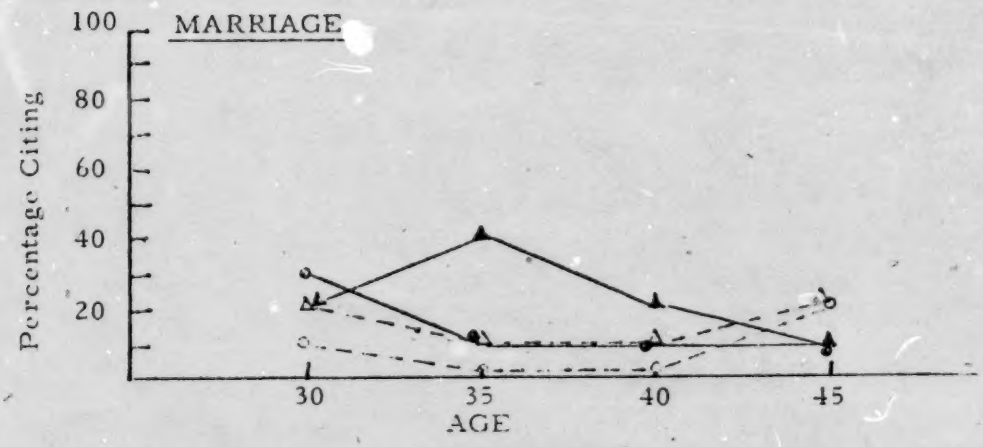


Figure 6

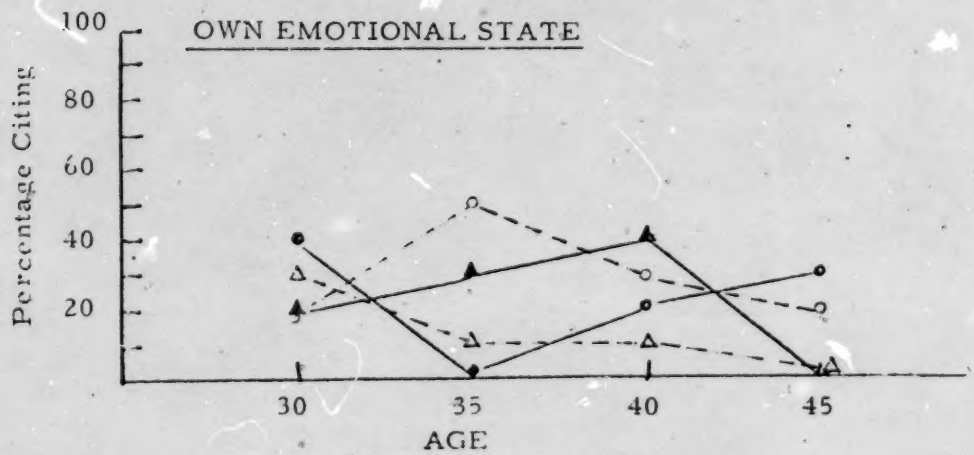


Figure 7

SOURCES OF HELP FOR SERIOUS PROBLEMS

x One of three most often cited
xx Cited by 50% or more

Figure 8

Most Cited Sources

AGE	28-32				33-37				38-42				43-47			
SEX	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
MARITAL	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S
Spouse/Lover	xx	x	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	x	x		xx	x
Friend	xx	xx	xx	xx	x	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	x	x	x
Parents	xx	xx	xx			x	x						x			
Other Family				x											x	
Clergy									x		x		xx		x	
Psychologist		x				x		x	x	x				xx		
Counselor		x			x				x					x		
Physician												x				
Lawyer												x				x
Business associate											x					
Community agency																

Figure 9

Least Likely Sources of Help

AGE	28-32				33-37				38-42				43-47			
SEX	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
MARITAL	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S	M	S
Spouse/Lover																
Friend															x	
Parents								x			x	x				xx
Other Family											x					
Clergy		x	xx				xx	x								
Psychologist												x	x		x	
Counselor			xx										x		x	
Physician	x															x
Lawyer	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	x	x		xx		
Business associate				xx	xx	xx			xx	xx				xx		xx
Community agency	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	x	xx	x	xx	xx	x	xx	xx	xx	x	